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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

LOCAL FIREFIGHTERS ASSIST IN COLUMBIA SHUTTLE RECOVERY EFFORTS

Nine firefighters from the Burns Interagency Fire Zone were dispatched to Longview, Texas, on February 18, 2003, to assist with the Columbia Shuttle recovery effort. The crew, along with hundreds of personnel from across the nation including 11 from the Malheur, Wallowa-Whitman and Umatilla National Forests, will grid the search areas and follow compass lines in rough vegetation to specific locations in the hunt for Columbia debris.

A message from the United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service Region 8, stated that recent changes in the use of the National Guard, the reduction of available volunteers to assist, and the desire by NASA to wrap up the recovery in the next 30 days has prompted a request for additional assistance from approximately 2,000 qualified Wildland firefighters and overhead personnel. This is the first incident involving the Office of Homeland Security and is viewed as a test of civilian response to a major catastrophe. The Wildland fire agencies' are currently the centerpiece in the efforts to find and recover shuttle material.

"This mission is a special opportunity for us. We are grateful to help our country and support the families who lost loved ones on the Columbia," commented Burns District Manager Tom Dyer. "We are incredibly proud to be part of the recovery effort." The nine individuals from the Burns District are expected to return home around March 15, 2003.

For further information on local area firefighters contributing and the Columbia Shuttle recovery effort, contact Jonathan Manski at the Burns District Office, 28910 Highway 20 West, Hines, Oregon, or call (541) 573-4400, weekdays, between 7:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.